

Our Community in Early Years Education

EDITORIAL – IJEYE 27:2

Recently, I spent an enjoyable Saturday at a local education practitioner conference that brought together 600 teachers from the region where I am based in England. The conference was at my home university where I first came to study as a part-time postgraduate student while I was a teacher working with 4-5-year-old children in a primary school a few kilometres away. At the conference, I had a wonderful time reconnecting with teachers I knew from my local early years settings and primary schools: I learned about aspects of practice they were developing, heard their news and made plans with them for future work we will do together. The conference was an opportunity to share with one another aspects of our everyday learning and teaching and it was a gathering of a community where we all felt we belonged. It was joyful.

Belonging is a basic need (Riley, 2017). More than a decade before I wrote this editorial, Woodhead and Brooker (2008) observed that ‘belonging is fundamental to well-being and happiness’ (p.3). Their essay for the Bernard van Leer Foundation concerned young children but we all need to feel we belong; indeed, the belief that we belong within a community can have a powerful positive effect on our mental health and well-being (Salami, Yaskina, Hegadoren, Diaz, Meherali, Rammohan, and Ben-Shlomo, 2017). However, as Gray and I have written elsewhere (Murray and Gray, 2018), globalisation and technology *inter alia* mean that although we may seem more connected to others now than we have ever been, many of us are connecting less with the communities we may have felt we belonged to in the past, due to many reasons including digital communications replacing direct engagement with those we know, families separated by work, and wars as well as their effects. Yet those of us in early years education are fortunate: we have possibilities of belonging to our shared community of early years educators at local, national and international levels, which means we can connect with one another.

At the Saturday conference, we were all educators who belonged together and we *were* together, in one place at one time. I felt I belonged there that day and it was a good feeling to be amongst those who are part of my local early years community. In nearby primary schools and nurseries, I have taught alongside some of those teachers who attended that day. During the time I have worked at the university, I have taught many of those teachers as they have studied for their Bachelors’ and Masters’ degrees or have attended continuing professional development courses. Many have worked with me in partnership to support new and aspiring teachers, many have attended workshops and keynotes I have led and a good number have participated in different ways in research with me. Many of our readers belong to similar local communities of early childhood educators with whom they have engaged in different ways over time.

Equally, many of our readers will network with their early years communities at national level. This may happen, for example, through membership of national early childhood organisations, our shared interests concerning national curriculum materials, or engagements with our national government officials concerning policy in the field of early childhood education. My own work at national level in the UK includes such activities. For example, I value my community engagement with TACTYC, the Association for Professional Development in Early Years in the UK; we meet regularly and have an annual conference. Our activities include advocacy and lobbying, and research and support concerning early years matters in the UK. I have also worked within communities advising government and non-governmental organisations on early childhood education issues. Our early years communities offer us opportunities to reach out and connect in many diverse ways at country level. Perhaps you do not currently feel you belong to a national early years community; if that is so, I warmly encourage you to join - or set up one - in your own country.

Some national early childhood communities are part of wider international communities; for example, I belong to the UK branch of the global L'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation PréScolaire (OMEP) – the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. Internationally, by engaging in global projects, early childhood advocacy with the United Nations and UNESCO, a professional development offer, knowledge exchange and child services, OMEP ‘...defends and promotes the rights of the child to education and care worldwide and supports activities which improve accessibility to high quality education and care’ (L'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation PréScolaire, 2019). I also belong to the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), ‘an independent, self-governing, international association which promotes and disseminates multi-disciplinary research on early childhood and its applications to policy and practice’ (EECERA, 2019). I have been attending EECERA annual conferences since 2004 and feel part of this global early childhood community when I meet my colleagues there each year. Belonging to the EECERA community has enabled me to develop research and writing partnerships, to publish articles in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* and a book: *Perspectives from Young Children on the Margins* (Murray and Gray, 2018). I co-convene the EECERA Young Children's Perspectives Special Interest Group, a vibrant community that researches and publishes work concerning young children's perspectives. In addition, I am a member of the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), which I value greatly: belonging to this network enables me to learn about work being undertaken by early childhood communities in the Asia-Pacific region, informing further my understanding of our field.

The work I do means I am privileged to engage with many different communities in our field of early years education, at local, national and international levels. As you are reading this article, I encourage you to think about the communities you are part of, what you might do for them and how they benefit your work. Perhaps you are thinking about new communities you might create or join in the future? You already belong to our *International Journal of Early Years Education* community of readers, reviewers and authors in the field of early childhood education and we are so pleased that you do. All of us in the field of early years education belong to our shared community of early years educators. Our connections enable us to share our knowledge and experiences with one another and belonging to our community is of great importance to us as individuals, to our field as it continues to develop, and especially to young children and the adults who share their lives. Importantly, we can model for the young children who are the heart of all we do what it means to belong.

The articles in this issue all concern belonging and community in the field of early childhood. In his article ‘A “region” under siege? Singularisation, regionalisation and genericism in early childhood studies in England’, Jim Hordern draws on an empirical study to examine the early childhood academic community's work in England, noting that whilst its fragmented structure leaves it open to external control, it is drawn together through its shared commitment, values and practices. Fan Si and Helen Yost's article ‘Keeping Connected: Social Media as a New Avenue for Communication and Collaboration in Early Childhood Education’ focuses on two important communities for young children: family and early childhood education. The study they discuss involved semi-structured interviews to explore ways social media tools may facilitate communication and collaboration between the two communities in a Tasmanian context.

The next four articles focus on ways of being and belonging in communities. In their article “‘Mud in my ears and jam in my beard’: Ways of behaving in early-childhood education’, Sarah MacQuarrie, Clare Nugent and Simon Beames share research using observations and interviews in early childhood settings in Denmark, Scotland, Finland was conducted to explore how particular ‘ways of being’ and social interaction may be influenced by diverse environments. In the article ‘How gender is constructed and experienced in the social world of the nursery’, Carol Aubrey and Charlotte Jones report on a small-scale case study that explored constructions and experiences of how gender in ‘the social world’ of an English nursery school. Ingibjorg Sigurdardottir, Pia Williams and Johanna Einarsdottir's article

concerns 'Preschool Teachers Communicating Values to Children' in Nordic early childhood contexts. The research they report was conducted using observations of communication between young children and pre-school teachers. In their article 'The Personal Relationship between the Kindergarten Teacher and the Parents as a Mediator between Cultures', Dolly Eliyahu-Levi and Michal Ganz-Meishar report on a phenomenological qualitative study which studies ways kindergarten teachers in Israel support the integration of migrant children by building relationships with their parents.

The final article in this issue focuses on children participating in their early childhood communities in Norway. For 'Hallmarks of participation—children's conceptions of how to get access to communities in kindergarten', Marianne Ree Særheim, Marit Alvestad and Eva Johansson analysed semi-structured group interviews with children aged five from three different settings and elicited five categories of children's prerequisites for participation in their communities. Following this, an expertly curated collection of abstracts in the field of early years education from our resident ERA Editor, Elizabeth Coates, concludes this issue.

The authors who have contributed to this issue indicate the value placed by researchers, practitioners, parents and children on belonging to early years education communities, at local, national or international levels. Through the *International Journal of Early Years Education*, whether we read, publish or review, those of us in the field can and do connect with one another to continue to build our rich community, in which we all belong.

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